

# The GREAT APE HUNT

By LUCILE McDONALD

**"F**IGHT with Big Apes Reported by Miners," read a headline which rocketed onto front pages of Pacific Northwest newspapers July 13, 1924.

"Party to Hunt for Mountain Devils" was its sequel the following day. For a week or so wonder tale of the hairy apes of Mount St. Helens was the subject of speculation. Since the death last fall of a man who said he was responsible for part of the excitement his story now can be told and the mystery cleared up.

Mount St. Helens, though only 9,671 feet high, is the setting for more tall tales than any of its loftier neighbors in the Cascades. Because it erupted as late as the 1840's it inspired awe. Its primitive areas, caves, canyons and haunting "voices" heard in the vicinity of Spirit Lake gave rise to legends of seeahitks, tall, hairy outcasts from ancient tribes, which spooked the place.

**W**HEN the great ape hunt was launched that hot July day 28 years ago the quest was for monsters that walked erect, swinging their long arms, throwing rocks and leaving large, four-toed tracks. Motion-picture-camera men, newspaper reporters, deputy sheriffs and armed Kelso citizens were out to capture one, dead or alive. They were spurred by the frenzied account of five prospectors who reported they had been treated to a night of torment by the fabled mountain devils.

Marion Smith of Kelso related that he and his son, Roy; Fred Beck, Gabe Lefever and John Patterson had been working a mining claim on the Muddy branch of the Lewis River, eight miles from Spirit Lake, when they saw the animals. Smith and Beck each fired at one and it tumbled backward into the canyon near where they had built a new cabin. The creature weighed about 400 pounds, was seven feet tall, had long, black and brown hair and four-inch ears sticking straight up.

The night following this encounter the ape's friends gathered around the



—Drawing by Stuart Pratt, Times Staff Artist.

THE SMITH PARTY had reported seeing "a creature weighing about 400 pounds, seven feet tall, with long black and brown hair and four-inch ears, sticking straight up."

**Hairy Apes on Mount St. Helens? A Story to That Effect Was Reported 28 Years Ago Next July. But Hunt as They Would, Experienced Mountain Men Never Were Able to Find the Apes. The Tale Now Has Been Written Off as a Hoax.**

cabin. One set up a terrific pounding on its chest, producing drumlike notes. Though the prospectors built a large fire to intimidate the creatures, the din continued, punctuated with the throwing of countless rocks on the roof. More than 200 stones entered the cabin through the chimney hole. The prospectors did not fire guns for fear of exhausting their ammunition. One of the rocks with which they were bombarded weighed 30 pounds and knocked out Beck.

SMITH'S party next morning told the forest ranger at Spirit Lake about the experience. Smith said he had seen four-toed tracks near his cabin and believed he unwittingly had built close to a cave occupied by the creatures. He thought he knew where it was and went so far as to say that later in the summer he was going to try to kill an ape and bring it in.

Newspapers printed columns about the attack. One editor asserted that it "corroborated and dignified" the old Indian legend that in some inaccessible sections of the Cascades strange wild

animals of the gorilla type existed and occasionally terrorized hunters and trappers. Readers recalled that Indians had found tracks of mountain devils for 60 years but this was the first time the creatures had been seen. One remembered unusual bloody tracks which later were credited to a lost miner who had injured his feet. Another said that, about 1900, James Spencer encountered an apelike animal which leaped into a tree, tore off limbs and gave his dog an unmerciful beating. When Spencer two days later ventured out and visited his trap line he saw the creature again carrying under its arm a trap and a bear which had been caught in it. Spencer hurriedly left the region and declined to return.

A Pendleton correspondent thought the apes might be descended from a tough old Indian named Kiki who harassed early Fort Vancouver settlers. Kiki, he said, undoubtedly took refuge in a mountain fastness and bred a race of shaggy supermen.

In Hoquiam Jorg Totsig, Clallam authority on tribal matters, predicted failure of the ape hunt, attributing the attack to the lower class of seeahitks or Nung-Nung. Seeahitks in their seasonal migrations, he said, appeared around Mount St. Helens the latter part of July and did not as a rule stay long, moving to the Olympics to fish and thence to Vancouver Island, where they wintered.

A COWLITZ Indian at Longview understood seeahitks to be 9 to 10 feet tall. They traveled at night, warning of impending deaths in families by making peculiar noises. He also had heard of a white-faced female baboon creature which reputedly was harmless.

Totsig talked to Smith and was convinced of the latter's sincerity, though by then forest rangers and wildlife authorities were scoffing at the story. One of the miners, it was said, had reported a wild man near his cabin two years earlier whom no one else saw. A ranger descended into the canyon seeking the body of the ape, and could not find a trace. Totsig said that was to be expected; seeahitks never forsook the body of their dead and if one of the tribe was killed his body was removed by his fellows.

A Kelso dispatch advanced the theory that spirits of the miners' own conjuring might have contributed to the night of horror. A game official reminded the public of the many legends centering around Spirit Lake and said this story could have been the product of lively imaginations.

The great expedition to capture the ape established that it was one-legged. All the tracks around the cabin were made with the right foot. A ranger duplicated them with the knuckles and palm of his hand and nearly panicked one search party into believing they were on a fresh trail.

AFTER the expedition spent an eventful night in the prospectors' cabin it was asserted that the mystery was not the presence of apes but how Smith ever had built the hut on a ledge half way down the steep sides of a glacial cirque. The ape was dismissed with the guess that the nearest one was in Ringling Brothers' big tent.

While the search went on 70 Y. M. C. A. boys camping a quarter of a mile away said they neither saw nor heard

anything unusual on the night of the reported horrendous encounter. However, Richard H. Tubman, who in the late 1930's was a ranger at Spirit Lake and now is stationed at Disston, Ore., discovered some new angles on this when about two months ago he met Orville Hunt, ex-logger and cougar hunter. Hunt said he and a companion, Al Coleman, led the Y. lads in two groups over Pine Creek Trail on the mountain, Coleman's group bringing up the rear. "It was the latter boys that heaved the first rocks over the ledge onto the cabin and thus began all the excitement," Tubman wrote The Times.

Two Portland boys in the party later admitted stumbling on the trail to the miners' cabin. They were frightened off with revolvers and rifles and supposed the miners made up the story to scare others away.

TUBMAN thinks the boys could have started the rocks rolling or that natural disintegration of the slopes may have caused fragments to slide and bounce on the roof. Whichever was the case, after the ape story was invented a friend of Coleman, Robert Lambert, decided to improve upon it. "Bob had been a sailor and a logger and was a good hand as a story teller and practical joker," Tubman related. "He told me himself that it was he who fashioned the ape tracks out of plywood and tracked up the pumice flats on the Plains of Abraham, a scheme he dreamed up to add realism to the miners' story."

Lambert died last fall, but his ape tracks live on in the folklore of Mount St. Helens.